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Guo Wengui, the maverick Chinese billionaire who threatens to crash Xi's party

The Trump-like real estate mogul promises to disrupt the showpiece party congress in Beijing with new revelations about the country's 'mafioso elite'

Tom Phillips in Beijing

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He paints himself as the Che Guevara of Chinese crony capitalism, a billionaire insurgent vowing to bring down the system from the comfort of his \$68m New York home.

"My only goal is to change China," Guo Wengui, an eccentric and exiled Chinese property magnate, declared earlier this month on the eve of a key political convention in Beijing that he is promising to disrupt with electrifying revelations of skulduggery at the pinnacle of Chinese power.

This Wednesday the curtains go up on the 19th Communist party congress – a week-long eruption of socialist pomp and circumstance marking the end of Xi Jinping's first term as China's commander-in-chief.

As more than 2,200 delegates flock to the capital for this intensely choreographed display of political theatre, Guo, who also uses the name Miles Kwok, is by far the most unusual figure threatening to rain on Xi's parade.

For months, the flamboyant real estate mogul has been disgorging reams of salacious - and largely unsubstantiated - allegations into the public sphere about some of his homeland's most powerful figures. "They are just a tiny group of mafiosos, pure and simple," Guo said during one of his most recent assaults on China's house of cards.

Now, with the congress about to commence, Guo claims he has more up his sleeve: "This," he tweeted ominously on Saturday, "is only the beginning!"

Roderick MacFarquhar, a China expert at Harvard University, said it was impossible to predict whether the billionaire would succeed in crashing Xi's party: "The wild card is what Mr Guo has been spewing out in New York ... He has promised to release his stuff as they are meeting in Beijing - and we will see."

Recent weeks have seen this well-connected globe-trotter - who is a member of Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago club and has shared private jets with Tony Blair - attempt to recast himself as a selfless freedom fighter battling "to expose the leviathan Chinese mafia state". "No one can withstand our pursuit of democracy, freedom and the rule of law," he boasted on Twitter this week.

Writing in the Washington Times last month, Guo claimed China had become "the most corrupt, tyrannical and brutal state on earth, bar North Korea". Only he - and his American hosts - could save it from "tyranny and barbarism".

But Guo, an international man of mystery whose very age remains shrouded in secrecy (depending on who you believe he was born in 1967 or 1970), is an unlikely and - to many unconvincing - advocate for democratic change.

He made his fortune as a politically savvy developer, whose reputed contacts with top party officials helped him wangle a string of lucrative projects. By 2014 Guo was China's 74th richest person, worth some £1.77bn according to a ranking of its top movers and shakers.

Last week Guo - now mired in legal disputes and with many of his assets frozen - slipped off that ranking of China's super rich. But one of Beijing's most unusual skyscrapers - the dragon-shaped Pangu Plaza - stands as a permanent monument to his success and, many suspect, his intimate and potentially explosive knowledge of the notoriously corrupt intersection between Chinese business and power.

"You don't get to have a building on Beijing's central access without being deep in the mud in China," said Bill Bishop, the Washington-based publisher of the Sinocism newsletter about Chinese politics. "Clearly over the years he has picked up stuff and Beijing is clearly worried about what he may know."

According to his telling, Guo fled to the US in 2014 after discovering he was to be detained as part of Xi's war on corruption, and later set up camp in a luxurious 18th floor apartment in Manhattan's Sherry-Netherland hotel overlooking Central Park.

It is from this not-so-humble 16,000 sq ft abode - whose furnishings reportedly include crystal chandeliers, Louis XVI furniture, and a Lego model of London Bridge - that Guo has launched his emoji-riddled online crusade against Communist party corruption. In webcasts, newspaper interviews and tweets to his 449,000 followers Guo has lambasted the party's finagling while simultaneously flaunting his own wealth and pulling power. (This month he has tweeted photos of guests including Steve Bannon and the New York Times' Pulitzer-winning columnist, Nicholas Kristof).

His prime target has been Wang Qishan, Xi's anti-corruption czar, whose family he accuses of having a secret stake in HNA, a \$53bn Chinese conglomerate known for its deal-making prowess.

Beijing has not taken kindly to Guo's incendiary, if largely unproven, claims. State media has denounced him as a "dirty trickster" peddling "political slander" and accused him of paying millions of pounds in bribes to a former intelligence chief. An Interpol "red notice" for his arrest was issued in April, at Beijing's behest.

Meanwhile the hyperbole-prone mogul claims he has suffered “multiple kidnap and assassination attempts, unprecedented in the last 100 years of Chinese history” while in the US. Last month he asked for asylum claiming his safety was at risk because of his status as “a political opponent of the Chinese regime”.

Bishop said the anti-Guo campaign suggested some in Beijing saw his mud-slinging as a genuine threat: “He’s lucky Xi Jinping doesn’t seem to have the proclivities of, say, the Russian president in terms of dealing with dissidents.”

There is concern, too, among US dissidents who believe Guo has hijacked their cause in a bid to save his own skin.

Wen Yunchao, a New York based campaigner, said Guo’s attempts to pose as an activist - which many suspect is a ploy to help him secure asylum - were an outrage: “As a businessman Guo colluded with the government. Every penny he has earned is dripping with blood.”

“Guo is no human rights champion ... he is doing what he is doing simply for his own sake and for the sake of his family, his friends and his property. That’s all,” Wen added.

Bishop said some dissidents had latched on to Guo as a potential patron and figurehead: “These people have dedicated their lives to fighting the Communist party and Guo is the biggest potential weapon they have had in a very long time.”

“[But] the idea that he is somehow a symbol of human rights work activism or pro-democracy is, I think, quite unfortunate and unfair to the folk who actually are human rights campaigners ... This is all about Guo and his family and getting his money.”

Guo did not respond to interview requests but in a recent conversation with the Wall Street Journal he said he had no plans to shut up. “Nothing can stop me,” he vowed.

In a podcast about the tycoon’s life and times, Mike Forsythe, a New York Times journalist who has spearheaded coverage of Guo, painted him as a charming if “Trumpish” storyteller whose motivations and future were hard to fathom: “We’ve never seen a tweeting, narcissistic Chinese billionaire before - so it’s kind of new territory.”

Additional reporting by Wang Zhen

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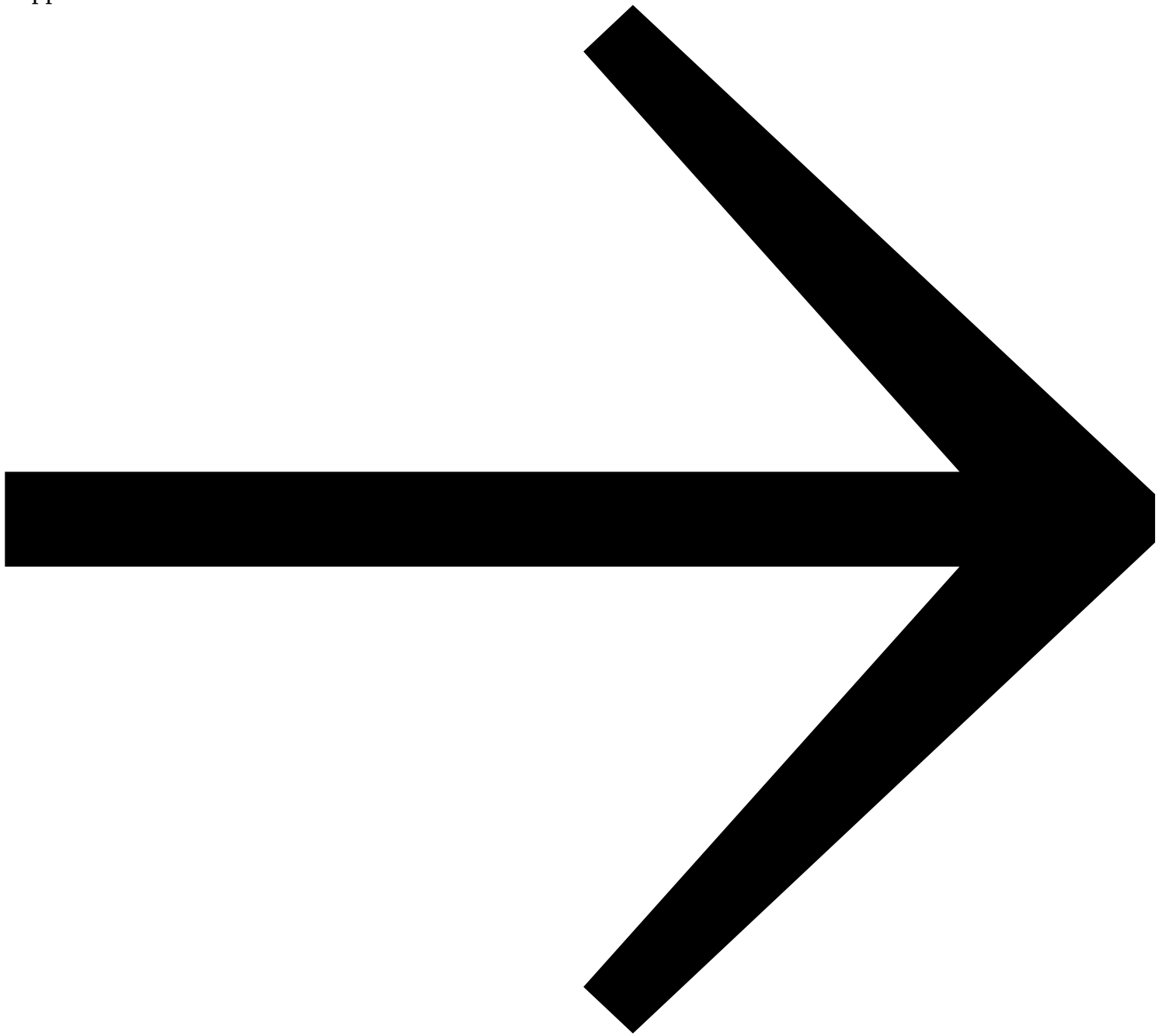
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